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Zimbabwe's Year of Freedom
Ndabaningi Sithole

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The cover photograph is courtesy of the African Arts Magazine, University of California at Los Angeles.

Concerning this illustration of the soapstone bird with the crocodile base, photographed against the wall of the ruins, Professor Brian Fagan of the University of California at Santa Barbara has commented:

"The soapstone bird figures represent the highest artistic achievement of the Karanga at Zimbabwe. Eight of these were found in the ruins. They perch on pillars up to five feet high."

Brian Fagan, "Zimbabwe: A Century of Discovery," African Arts, Spring 1969, p. 25.

ZIMBABWE'S YEAR OF FREEDOM 1978

This issue is devoted to an interview with the Rev. Ndabaningi Sithole, founder and President of the Zimbabwe African National Union. The photograph on the cover is particularly significant because archaeology plays a far greater political role in Zimbabwe/Rhodesia than in most countries. For decades most "Europeans" argued that the Zimbabwe Ruins and many other "ruins" could not have been built by the ancestors of the present-day African population of the country. Even when it was long established that Zimbabwe was of "African" origin and not of "Phoenician" or other origin, the Rhodesian government continued support for at least an alternative thesis.

The coming government of Zimbabwe will, it is hoped by democratic-minded observers, be a truly majority government. That is to say, it will provide not merely African leadership but leadership that represents the wishes of a majority of all the people of Zimbabwe. The syndrome of "one man, one vote, for only one election" need not extend to a free Zimbabwe.

Reverend Sithole is one of the leading contestants to head a new government in Zimbabwe, and we present his views as a contribution to understanding African aspirations and one man's vision of a free Zimbabwe.

MUNGER: Welcome to the pages of our publication. For the record, when were you born?

SITHOLE: On July 21, 1921 my mother, Siyapi Tshuma gave birth to me. My maternity ward was a mud hut with a dirt floor. My bed was a reed mat and the skin of a goat for my blanket. On the day of my birth and subsequently, I was forced to inhale smoke from the burning horn of a goat. This was to make me immune from outside evil.

MUNGER: Tell us about your father.

SITHOLE: His name was Jim Sithole who lived in Gazaland. At the age of 18 he left home and after a short stay in

Umtali he went to Salisbury and found employment as a "kitchen boy."

MUNGER: What was his education?

SITHOLE: He could not read or write any language. In Salisbury he learned to speak some English and Afrikaans.

MUNGER: How did you grow up?

SITHOLE: From the age of seven until nine I herded cattle. The hours were long and we had nothing to eat during the day. Typically of other boys, I wore two skin aprons -- amabetshu -- to cover myself in front and in back.

MUNGER: You didn't attend school?

SITHOLE: When I was ten my father decided to move from my mother's place, Nyamandlovu, to Shabani. We walked -- it took us two days -- the fifty miles to the Bembesi railway station. In Shabani, I started my schooling at age twelve. It was mostly vocational training such as woodwork and raising vegetables for the Wesleyan Church. I learned the three "R's" with the encouragement of frequent whippings by the headmaster.

MUNGER: How long did you stay in school?

SITHOLE: Some time in 1935 I got a letter from a younger cousin of mine. It was written in English but my education had progressed so slowly that I couldn't read it. It "stung me inside," as we say, and made me determined to advance my education. After the objections of my employer and my father, who thought I was just lazy, I ran away to the boarding school.

MUNGER: Is that when you met Garfield Todd? [A future Prime Minister of Rhodesia who was defeated, on the grounds of being too liberal and of arrogantly playing "Todd," by Sir Edgar Whitehead, who was in turn defeated for being too liberal by Ian Smith.]

SITHOLE: Yes, Reverend Todd was the missionary in charge.

MUNGER: I know you carried on to teachers' school and became a Methodist preacher, but when did you come to America?

SITHOLE: In 1955 I went to the Andover-Newton Theological Seminary [in Massachusetts], and received my Bachelor of Divinity in 1958.

MUNGER: Were you tempted to remain in the United States?

SITHOLE: No. People often asked me about it. But I told them that I had to return to Rhodesia to free it.

MUNGER: Recent historiography by Shona authors has clearly changed the false image of Shona passivity to European rule from the first days of occupation. But when I based myself in Salisbury in 1953-54 and traveled extensively in Rhodesia, there weren't many signs of African nationalism and resistance. I used to visit with Charles Mzingeli, then the most prominent African leader, in my home in Borrowdale (it shocked the neighbors) and in his shop in Harare, and I published an article about him. But in June 1958, when I was in Rhodesia again, Garfield Todd's United Rhodesia Party was defeated. I wrote then that it "marked the end of effective white liberalism in Southern Rhodesian politics." Wasn't it a difficult time to return and enter African politics at that juncture?

SITHOLE: Yes, and also because I became the Principal of a primary school and we were forbidden to be in political organizations. But I wrote a lot of political articles.

MUNGER: I remember them. My pessimism in 1958 was a little premature. You still had some freedom of action. As the Executive Director of the African Universities Program funded by the Ford Foundation, I made a grant to Dr. Charles Frantz to work with Professor Cyril Rogers on their book Racial Themes in Southern Rhodesia (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1962). But long before formal publication, the studies of white racial attitudes were being used by the Whitehead government as a basis for steps in eliminating racial discrimination and members of the white opposition were denouncing the questionnaires as Communist-inspired. You are right. The gradual liberal trend did not end with

Todd. The momentum continued for a year under Whitehead.

SITHOLE: We were still optimistic. It was a shock to me in 1959 when the African National Congress was banned and 500 Africans arrested on the grounds that they were plotting to kill the whites. Then we created another movement called the National Democratic Party. It also became very popular with the people and it was banned.

MUNGER: Is that when you formed ZAPU?

SITHOLE: We formed the Zimbabwe African People's Union in 1962 and it became popular with the masses. Again, the Rhodesian regime banned the party. So the next year (1963), we formed yet another party of which I am the first President: ZANU or Zimbabwe African National Union.

When this party was formed, we thought very seriously that we should adopt new strategies altogether. Our previous strategy of talking to the British government and appealing to the UN and the OAU had not worked.

MUNGER: And your new strategy?

SITHOLE: Great confrontation, which developed with the passage of time into armed struggle. I want to make it quite clear to your readers that when we finally decided on armed struggle it was not a light-hearted decision. Everything else we had done had failed. This armed struggle is going on to this day. We opposed the UDI [Unilateral Declaration of Independence by the Smith government against Great Britain] and we do so now. We started the armed struggle to win our independence just as other African countries had won their independence.

MUNGER: You spent a long time in detention before you could join the armed struggle from outside the country. Why, then, did you decide to go back to Zimbabwe?

SITHOLE: Because we in ZANU became convinced that some of us had to work with our people inside Zimbabwe at whatever cost.

MUNGER: And with the Rhodesian government?

SITHOLE: We have tried our very best to come to terms with the Rhodesian government and ensure change without further bloodshed.

MUNGER: What do you think of the Anglo-American proposals?

SITHOLE: I believe that now there are many factors present in Zimbabwe which were not there before. If we exploit them successfully we are in a position to achieve independence through peaceful negotiations. If I didn't believe this I would not be throwing my whole mind, my whole soul, my whole heart into the matter. I honestly believe that the factors existing now inside our country give us hope for peaceful settlement. Everyone in Zimbabwe wants this.

MUNGER: There have been years of negotiations without settlement. Why the optimism now?

SITHOLE: The thirteen years of no settlement have given people a great deal of anxiety, a great deal of skepticism; and a great deal of unnecessary suffering.

MUNGER: And what of the reaction of the guerrillas outside the country?

SITHOLE: When the Anglo-American proposals were first published on the first of September 1977, the African people as well as the freedom fighters reacted to these proposals. Broadly speaking, one would say on matters of substance the African people are very happy. I am also happy on matters of substance. The freedom fighters are very happy on matters of substance. For instance, we like the fact that the proposals put forward the case for one man/one vote settlement. Some people are in the unfortunate habit of saying that the present armed struggle is a racial war, but I can assure you that this is not correct. It is a franchise war.

Since the white people came to our part of the world, the African people have not had effectively the vote to choose the leaders who make the decisions by which they are to live. So we like the present proposals because they accept one man/one vote, for which so many of our people have been fighting and for which they have actually died. We further like the proposals because they talk of independence in 1978. They talk of a justiciable bill of rights, very

much unlike the present declaration of rights, which is not in any way justiciable. We like also the question of an independent judiciary. We also like in the proposals the question of nonracialism. We believe that human beings are human beings first and foremost. They don't become human beings because they belong to this or that race, but they are human beings first and foremost. And we like these proposals because they uphold that principle which is so dear to our hearts, particularly as victims of racial discrimination of long standing.

MUNGER: What didn't you like about the proposals?

SITHOLE: Those features closely related to the question of the transitional period. For instance, according to the proposals, a British resident commissioner is to be sent to Zimbabwe, and he would be in charge of the transitional period. He will have all power; he will in fact be the entire legislature of the country. Now we feel very strongly that since the resident commissioner is not responsible to the people of Zimbabwe but to the British Government, over which we do not have any effective control whatsoever, so much power -- almost absolute power -- should not be placed in the hands of one man. As you will remember, it was Lord Acton himself who once said, "Popular power corrupts, but absolute power corrupts absolutely." For the good of his soul, we do not want him corrupted.

MUNGER: He?

SITHOLE: Lord Carver. When he visited Salisbury we told him our position, and we suggested to him that in place of a one-man administration, there should be a five-man administrative council which he would head. We pointed out to him that the reintroduction of the British presence in Zimbabwe was welcome, but we want that British presence to be controllable by us inside the country. The heads of the parties which are being presently consulted would help to form the council that we suggested. But another problem which we have run into is that of cease-fire. One school of thought maintains that there should be cease-fire immediately. Another school of thought, which is ours, maintains that there should be no cease-fire until first and foremost we have a formal agreement on the basic principles. At present all these principles are floating in Salisbury, in London,

in Washington, D.C., and elsewhere in independent Africa. But no formal agreement has as yet been made. Now, those who are fighting ask this question: If you say we should stop fighting now, what have we in return? We took up arms because we wanted certain things, and until we get those things, and that is a settlement based on one man/one vote, there is no point in stopping the fight. And the African nationalist leaders also feel very strongly that to stop fighting before there is a formal settlement would no doubt undermine their bargaining position. That is one of the problems that we face as we try to arrive at a settlement. But of course the weakness with the Anglo-American proposals is that they depend for their implementation on the wishes of one man, and that is Mr. Ian Smith.

MUNGER: You don't trust him?

SITHOLE: Your readers know that just before UDI was taken, the Prime Minister, Harold Wilson, and Mr. Smith met in Salisbury to try and resolve the problem, but they failed; and on the Tiger [British warship] in 1966 the two men met and they failed; and again they tried the same exercise on the Fearless in 1968, but they failed. In 1971 Sir Alec Douglas-Home and Mr. Smith tried to resolve the problem, but again they failed; and in 1974, Bishop Muzorewa and Mr. Smith held talks in Salisbury with the same result of failure. And in 1975, the ANC delegation -- and I was among the delegation myself -- and Mr. Smith, met in the Milton Buildings, but again we failed. At the beginning of 1976, Mr. Nkomo and Mr. Smith did meet and they tried to resolve the problem, but both men failed. Only at the end of last year there was the Geneva conference, which again failed. In all this long history of negotiations, of trying to find a settlement to the problem that faces us, Mr. Smith has been the only constant factor, but all others have been variable factors. Now the question which is being raised is, will the Anglo-American initiative succeed given the facts of history? Now this is where we feel very strongly that the present proposals, while substantially they are commendable to the African people, while they are accepted by the African people and the freedom fighters, their biggest weakness lies in the fact that they depend for their implementation on the wishes of one man. If today Mr. Smith could say "Yes," that would

be the end of the matter, but if he says "No," then we are back to square one.

MUNGER: Is Mr. Smith the only factor?

SITHOLE: No. Part of the problem is that so many parties are involved. For instance, when Kenya wanted her independence, the problem was between Britain and Kenya. When Zambia wanted her independence, the problem was between Britain and Zambia. And this was true of other ex-British colonies. But in our case, the problem has become highly involved. It is no longer only between Britain and ourselves, but it is now between Britain and the OAU, Britain and the Front Line States, Britain and the United Nations, Britain and the USA, Britain and South Africa, Britain and the Soviet Union, Britain and something else, Britain and something else! So many people have become involved, with the result that a simple problem of decolonization has become unnecessarily complicated. For instance, the Soviet Union stated about two or three weeks ago that all power should be handed over to the Patriotic Front, which inside the country does not exist, but only exists outside the country. The same idea has been put forward by Zambia. Zambia has said that there should be no elections before independence. In other words, give independence to a particular political party, and after that, hold the elections. But the people of Zimbabwe, the freedom fighters of Zimbabwe, do not hold that position. The position they hold is that no power should be handed over to any political party, no power should be handed over to any political leader, but power must be handed over to the people themselves through the instrumentality of one man/one vote. Once the people have the power, then it is the people themselves who will decide on the question of their leaders. At free elections they will be able to choose men of their own liking; they will be able to choose political organizations of their own liking. There is a tendency, especially from the Soviet Union and from other countries, that would like to superimpose leadership upon the people of Zimbabwe, and one of the things of course that appalls us is the fact that Britain and the United States tend to listen more and more to this myth of the Patriotic Front, which does not enjoy the massive support of the people inside the country. And one of the reasons really why people in Zimbabwe do not like a one-man administration is their

fear that if this man who was only responsible to Britain was given all the power, Britain might do something and hand it over to the Patriotic Front, to which it listens so much to the exclusion of other parties that have internal support within the country. Those are some of the problems that we face.

MUNGER: I don't think that many observers would agree with you that the Patriotic Front is as much a myth inside the country as you suggest. But tell us what you are fighting for beyond independence.

SITHOLE: We in Zimbabwe are not fighting in order to resuscitate racism. We have suffered from it.

We are not fighting the white people as such, but we are fighting an oppressive system. Many people have often asked me the question, "What will be the place of a white man in a free and independent Zimbabwe?" Our answer is quite simple; right from the beginning we have stated quite clearly our position of nonracialism. White people will be welcome to Zimbabwe as long as they are willing to live under the laws of that country. We realize that we have almost a unique economy in the country and this economy has been built with the full cooperation of all the races, Blacks, Whites, Asians and Coloureds, who live in Zimbabwe. We feel very strongly that a free and independent Zimbabwe will need even more of this cooperation. And this is why we have gone even out of our way to try and convince white farmers, white business people, and transport operators that there is no need for them to be fearful of a free and independent Zimbabwe, but to prepare and work under a majority government. Some of them have lived there not only for first and second, but third and fourth generations. They have nowhere else to go. We accept this, that they are entitled to a home in a free and independent Zimbabwe, inasmuch as every black person there is entitled to one. What we want in Zimbabwe is not the oppression of one race over the other, but rather self-determination. What we want is a constitutional government because we realize that unless the people themselves decide on the true nature of their own government, then we can say goodbye to economic, political and social stability in that part of the world. What I am appealing for is cooperation in the democratic process that we would like to see going inside Rhodesia or Zimbabwe.

MUNGER: May we go back to the details of change. You want a five person commission. Who would be represented?

SITHOLE: The members of the administrative council will be drawn from the heads of the present political parties which are being consulted by both the British and the American governments. For instance, the president of the Rhodesian Front, which is the party in power, will be part of that council; the president of ZANU, which is myself, will be a part of that council; the president of ZAPU will also be a part of that council; and the president of the UANC (United African National Council), Bishop Muzorewa, will also be a part of that council. Now note that the Patriotic Front does not in any way figure in our own thinking, simply because as a political party it is not there, it is not internal-based. Nkomo is the president of ZAPU, and he was elected by a considerable body of men as president. Now the Patriotic Front has no president, it has no central committee of its own, it has no military high command of its own, but what we regard in Zimbabwe as the true realities of our situation are those four parties, the Rhodesian Front party, ZANU, ZAPU, and the UANC.

MUNGER: Not Mr. Smith?

SITHOLE: Mr. Smith is the president of his own party, the Rhodesian Front. Under that definition, he qualifies to participate in the council.

MUNGER: Could you characterize for us your relation with Bishop Muzorewa. The last time I saw you was in New York over a year ago, and at that time there was paper unity, at least, between the two of you and also Josh Nkomo.

SITHOLE: My differences with Bishop Muzorewa are historical as well as strategic. When we started ZANU in 1963, we adopted a policy of direct confrontation in the light of the fact that the constitutional method had not paid us the expected dividends. And so the armed struggle was started by ZANU, and for a long time we have been fighting, and ZANU has made a real impact in the whole political climate of the country. The present settlement exercise would have been next to impossible but for the activities of ZANU. So you can say, therefore, that the orientation

of ZANU is somewhat different from that of the UANC as founded by Bishop Muzorewa. The UANC was founded in 1971 to oppose the Anglo-Rhodesian proposals in 1971 and 1972, so that the UANC came into existence purely as a constitutional party. But its leaders, of course, have not suffered as much as leaders, for instance, of ZANU and ZAPU. They have not suffered for their own cause, and the people tend to trust more those who have actually suffered for their own cause. But our objectives are the same, namely, we all want independence for Zimbabwe. We all want one man/one vote to be given to the people of Zimbabwe. We all desire a peaceful settlement. I should point out that when people take up arms to fight, they are not doing it for its own sake. They do that in order that they may get what they want, and since in our own thinking the prospects of a settlement are so bright, we do not see any reason why we should not exploit to the fullest the constitutional peaceful method.

MUNGER: And the Patriotic Front?

SITHOLE: Before October 1976, nothing was heard of the Patriotic Front. But towards the time of the Geneva Conference the Front came into existence. The reason why it did so was that there was a strong desire to strengthen ZAPU, which was going down in its image and in its influence. So Nkomo and the Mugabe were brought together by some of the Front Line states to form this Patriotic Front. The formation, the composition, of the Patriotic Front is very interesting to note at this point, it was formed by the president of one party and the secretary-general of another party. Nkomo was the president of ZAPU, and Mugabe the secretary-general of ZANU. Now the whole idea was to divide ZANU, which was very, very strong. It was eclipsing ZAPU. Another idea was, of course, to strengthen the hand of Mr. Nkomo so that he would become the first president of a free and independent Zimbabwe. Since the formation of the Patriotic Front, they have not been able to have a unified military high command. As I have already indicated, ZANU has its own military command, and ZAPU has its own military command. The Patriotic Front has not been able to have a central committee. But ZANU has and ZAPU has also. The people inside the country came out very fiercely against the intended imposition, or threatened imposition, of the Patriotic Front upon the people of Zimbabwe. I myself remained quite opposed to the idea

of the Patriotic Front because it was done behind our backs. We were not there when it was formed. Bishop Muzorewa was not there when it was formed. The people of Zimbabwe were not invited to that particular conference. It was merely something that was done between Robert Mugabe, my own secretary-general, and Mr. Joshua Nkomo, the president of ZAPU. Now the other presidents of the Front line States supported the Patriotic Front just because it was supported in the first place by President Kaunda, who would like to see Mr. Nkomo become the first president. Now the British Government has tended to listen very closely to what the Patriotic Front says in deference to President Kaunda. Britain has its own diplomatic problems. She wants to keep the friendship of President Kaunda. She wants to keep the friendship of President Nyerere of Tanzania, and for diplomatic reasons therefore she goes along with the idea of the Patriotic Front. But whatever the United States Government feels about the Patriotic Front, it's quite clear to us that ultimately the problem will be settled by the people of Zimbabwe themselves.

MUNGER: What is your time frame for independence?

SITHOLE: According to the general trend, the transitional period is supposed to begin before too long and go on for six months, and then there would be elections. Independence is currently held as coming on the 24th of September 1978, and everybody is excited, and everybody is working very hard towards that. Even our own freedom fighters are very keen to see that this should actually take place so that they can go back home and live like everybody else. Now what may cause a breakdown here is the relaxation of external factors, especially the pressure that is being exerted by both the United States and Britain and also, of course, by the United Nations, and also by the freedom fighters themselves. There are external factors, as I have indicated here, like the Patriotic Front, which is so much afraid of free elections that they have become, what you say, the fly in the ointment, or in the oil. If they should succeed in being a hurdle in the process of democracy, in the process of free elections, in the process of arriving at a peaceful settlement, then of course it will take a little longer.

MUNGER: Is Ambassador Andrew Young a positive factor in the

achievement of independence?

SITHOLE: One of the biggest criticisms regarding the policy of the United States was their silence on Southern Africa in general and on Zimbabwe in particular. But since the Carter Administration we are very pleased that for the first time the United States has come out openly on the side of majority rule inside Zimbabwe, and its present involvement in the exercise to find a solution is welcome. In fact, we maintain that Britain, which had almost lost any control over Rhodesia, has been greatly strengthened. Ambassador Young is a person who no doubt has represented very favorably the image of the United States, and we have understood the American thinking much better through his activities and through his pronouncements. I must say in Zimbabwe, as well as in the rest of independent Africa, Ambassador Young sits very high.

MUNGER: Prime Minister Smith has said that he now accepts one man/one vote for Zimbabwe. Only last year he was quoted as saying, "Not in a thousand years." How do you view this?

SITHOLE: The public acceptance of one man/one vote by Mr. Smith represents a major step forward in the long struggle to find a solution to the problems which have bedeviled Zimbabwe.

MUNGER: Do you trust Smith?

SITHOLE: I can't guarantee his sincerity, but we intend to test it in various ways. Once we are convinced that he is genuine, and once we have a formal signed agreement, then we will call off the fighting.

MUNGER: Our readers may have some skepticism as to whether you and ZANU have the power to call off all of the fighting. But may we turn to post-independence. Do you see a need for a deliberate ethnic balance in the new government?

SITHOLE: Yes, we must be very careful about that. There must be people from all parts of Zimbabwe, with no ethnic group dominating.

MUNGER: But isn't the record of your own party spotty in

that regard? Herb Chitepo was an extremely able man. I recall so well visiting him in his Salisbury office when he became the first African lawyer in the history of Rhodesia. Wasn't ethnicity a factor in his assassination?

SITHOLE: Yes it was. I was in prison at the time and he was a very loyal lieutenant in Zambia. Some of my people don't like me to admit it but we did have ethnic divisions inside ZANU. We are carefully avoiding that now. But we did lose Chitepo and it will be a long time before we replace a man of his calibre. [Chitepo had become Attorney General of Tanzania after its independence.]

MUNGER: If you seek ethnic balance in the armed forces then you won't have room for as many Karangas as there are now.

SITHOLE: That is right. But the Rhodesian Army is 80 percent African now and it will not have to be as large. We will find other jobs for men discharged to achieve ethnic balance.

MUNGER: But aside from that, the present Africans in the Rhodesian army are acceptable?

SITHOLE: No. Not all of them. Some of them, such as the Selous Scouts, have a notorious reputation for killing our people. And there are others we will not want.

MUNGER: And whites?

SITHOLE: We have talked with many military leaders. When Africans control the government there will be positions for some of them just as for the many whites we will have in the civil service.

MUNGER: What are your thoughts on South Africa in the past and in the future?

SITHOLE: Well, Mr. Vorster encouraged UDI and we opposed it. Vorster helped Mr. Smith by sending South African police to the border. But Mr. Vorster is not doing that now. We will get along with South Africa after independence just as well as Mozambique gets along now. They need South

African railwaymen to operate the port of Maputo and Mozambique sends miners to work in South Africa without problems.

MUNGER: A final question. Are you consistent? First you work for peaceful change. Then you say it is hopeless and take up an armed struggle. Now you are back in Zimbabwe and advocating peaceful change again.

SITHOLE: I am consistent in seeking the best way to independence for my people. As I have said earlier, we did try through legitimate political organizations supported by our people for a peaceful change. When we were banned we had no alternative except to fight for our freedom. Now I believe we can peacefully achieve independence in 1978 without further bloodshed.

Editorial Note

The foregoing "interview" is the composite result of several recorded interviews, luncheon conversations, and prepared statements. Answers have been edited to provide a better chronological order and to group answers to similar questions. In a few instances, Reverend Sithole referred us to previous statements of his as providing the answers and these have been incorporated.

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